

and personal dramas of the medical study on human subjects, which should come clearly to the fore, disappointingly disintegrate. Instead, the book ends with a failed experiment, a gratuitous, gory autopsy, and a nurse-soldier romance—piled-up plot elements lacking any meaningful pattern.

In her historical novel *An Imperfect Lens* (Shaye Areheart Books, 2006, \$25.00), **Anne Roiphe** creates a kind of suspense by detailing her characters' numerous near-misses with cholera in late nineteenth-century Egypt. The slices of pineapple they turn down, the narrator tells us, have been cut by a knife sharpened on a whetstone dipped in water contaminated by human waste. Another kind of suspense, or perhaps sympathy, arises from the gap between this microbe-level omniscience and the ignorance of the earnest French scientists who are on a mission to Alexandria to discover the cause of cholera. Does it come from bird droppings? Rainwater? In the midst of other intrigues, a romance develops between an Alexandrian Jewess named Este and one of the scientists as they work together in the laboratory. The lovers fear run-of-the-mill opposition to their intermarriage, but are thwarted by even larger disasters in the last days of the epidemic. The French scientists lose the race of discovery to a rival German scientist, cholera at last claims a central character, and Este's family must flee anti-Jewish hostility to find safety, ironically, in Germany. Cholera and anti-Semitism, it seems, subside at times, but will inevitably flare up again somewhere else.

—Shala Erlich

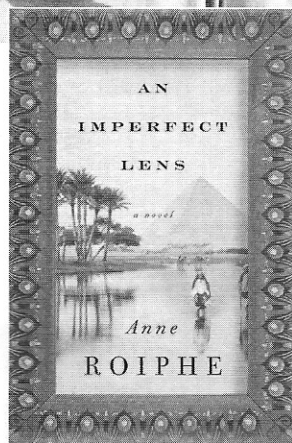
Israeli Street Names Familiar as Old Friends

Authors **Batya Gur** and **Yael Heday** colonize the literary landscapes of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, respectively, in novels deeply rooted in the geography of Israel today. Gur's detective novel *Murder on Bethlehem Road* takes place in Jerusalem's Baka neighborhood, where the order of the streets (Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda) parallels the birth order of the twelve tribes. And Heday's intimate domestic portrait *Accidents* is set in the cafes and apartments of downtown Tel Aviv, with its Bauhaus architecture

and towering date palms. Reading these novels is like embarking on a guided tour of the neighborhoods of Israel's two largest cities—except that you don't need to put on sunblock before setting out.

Murder on Bethlehem Road is the latest in the popular series of detective novels featuring Michael Ohayon, the affable Moroccan-born Chief Superintendent of Jerusalem's Special Crimes Unit. Ohayon is called to the attic of an old Arab house under renovation, where the body of a beautiful young woman is found brutally bludgeoned. She is identified as Zahara Bashari, the daughter of Yemenite immigrants who had been probing one of the worst scandals in Israeli history: the kidnapping of Yemenite babies during the early years of the State. Ohayon and the other members of his unit attempt to penetrate the closed circle of Zahara's Baka neighborhood, from the illegal Arab worker born in Ramallah to the gay Australian lover of Zahara's neighbor to the fat little girl named Nessia who mysteriously disappears with her dog shortly after the murder. As the detectives walk up and down the streets that intersect Bethlehem Road, Baka's main artery, the neighborhood comes vividly to life: We see the abandoned old house at 8 Mordechai Hayehudi; the kiosk on Yehuda Street; and the synagogues on nearly every corner. ("What is this, like in Meah She'arim?" asks one of the detectives, when she and her partner stumble upon yet another mikvah.)

But it is not just the geographical reality that Gur explores in this novel; she also maps out the tensions that lie at the heart of the Israeli political landscape. Set during the Al Aqsa Intifada, this novel deals with the rift between Arabs and Israelis and, even more significantly, with the hostility between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. ("You don't behave like a Moroccan," the ever-professional Ohayon is told by the lawyer whom he interrogates about Zahara's murder.) We learn, too, about the impact of the Holocaust on Israeli society, where children grew up in the fifties with constant hints of the horrors that took place "over there." And we come to understand what it means to live "despite the dead," in an age of riots and bombings and the dirty laundry that is inevitably aired among neighbors in close quarters. "What's disgusting is this city, with all its filth. It's all coming out now, and not just the garbage,"



Michael's lover remarks. "If you want a bit of beauty around here, you have to look upward, toward the sky, and not at the streets." Yet, like David Grossman's *Someone to Run With*, this is very much a novel of the streets—of the "Jerusalem of below" rather than the "heavenly Jerusalem."

While part of Yael Hedaya's *Accidents* takes place in Jerusalem's German Colony, the book as a whole is very much a Tel Avivian. Hedaya tells the story of Yonatan Luria, a moderately-successful middle-aged author living in a small apartment with his pre-teen daughter Dana. Two years after his wife's sudden death in a car accident, Yonatan is trying to get back to writing, and Dana is struggling to fit in at school. Through a mutual friend, Yonatan is introduced to Shira Klein, a best-selling novelist in her mid-thirties whose father is slowly dying of old age. With Dana cheering them on, Yonatan and Shira overcome their emotional scars and fall in love with one another.

Like *Bethlehem Road Murder*, Hedaya's novel refers to the names of streets and junctions as if they are familiar old friends. It is not long before we can recognize Allenby Street, where Shira's father's architecture office used to be located; Shenkin Street, site of Yonatan and Dana's favorite café; and the Ganot interchange, where the traffic eases up between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. "It was not Sodom on her mind but Tel Aviv," Hedaya writes of Shira. "How normal it seemed now, how like itself, persistent in its collective disregard of private suffering." Through Yonatan and Shira's eyes, we also come to appreciate the pulse of life among secular Israelis, who resent the presence of kashrut certificates instead of menus in restaurant windows, and who stay away from long skirts and hats lest they be mistaken for "the religious."

Yael Hedaya continues to bring Israel to life through her writing; her latest novel, *Eden*, came out in Hebrew earlier this year. Batya Gur died tragically of cancer in May 2005 at the age of 57, yet one of her books still awaits translation into English. Though the road map that these novels lay out is very different from the one we may read about in the newspapers, the Israel they depict is no less real.

—Ilana Kurshan

Fixated on Our Own Brand Names?

In this novel by playwright **Wendy Wasserstein**, contemptible social climber Judy Tremont is "secretly sure she could write one of those Park Avenue princess novels." From the very first page of *Elements of Style* (Knopf, 2006, \$23.95), the reader is barraged with the names of fashion designers, prep schools, and socialites real and invented. Among the invented is Samantha Acton, a "thoroughbred" Upper East Sider whose attendance at any party guarantees its inclusion in the gossip columns. Samantha's husband is a dermatologist whose office refrigerator is "the most exclusive club for butt fat in the country." Then there is Barry Santorini, a wildly successful director with pockmarked face, trademark sweatshirt, and roots in the working class. His wife Clarice lists as her number-one skill the ability to manage the staff in their four homes.

So what separates Wasserstein's *Elements* from the Park Avenue princess novel? Perhaps it's the inclusion of Dr. Frankie Weissman, an angelic pediatrician who treats both the spoiled brats of the Upper East Side and the asthma-plagued children of East Harlem, while simultaneously remaining devoted to her ailing father. Of all Wasserstein's characters here, Frankie shows the most evidence of a thoughtful and sincere inner life, though she's fixated on her own brand names: Spence, Princeton, and Mount Sinai Hospital, instead of Hermès, Mercedes, and Saint-Tropez.

The book begins with Frankie reuniting with former classmate Samantha in the fall of 2001. A few adulterous affairs and a few more dinner parties follow, but in place of a true plot, Wasserstein presents a cast of characters to evoke New York City in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center. These are all individuals not directly affected by the horror, but who experienced the same fear and anxiety as the rest of the city—albeit with Cipro packed in Fendi emergency kits. Near the end of the novel, Wasserstein veers from what did in fact happen to what might have been. Her description of a second attack the following year seems contrived, although it may be because the reader will certainly still remember the awful reality.

